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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 001216

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/19/2012

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SUBJECT: NEPAL'S KING HEADS TO INDIA AFTER COMPLETING FIRST YEAR ON THRONE

REF: 01 KATHMANDU 1673

Classified By: Ambassador Michael E. Malinowski, Reasons 1.5 (b), (d).

11. (C) Summary. The first trip abroad as monarch by Nepal's King Gyanendra will be a visit to India June 23-30. Gyanendra laid the groundwork for the trip in his first-ever interview with the foreign press, granted to a leading Indian daily, when he played to India's conservative government by emphasizing the common cultural heritage shared by Nepal and India. The King's visit comes on the heels of an Indian military delegation's assessment tour of Nepal and controversy surrounding Indian government allegations that Pakistani militants are operating from Nepali soil. He will likely seek New Delhi's help combating the Maoist insurgency and support for Nepal's embattled democracy, while India will push for Kathmandu to crack down on rumored anti-Indian elements. Gyanendra has become less unpopular over the past year, burnishing his image by appearing in a ceremonial role at religious events and making measured statements to the press in support of the constitution. Given the extraordinary and traumatic circumstances accompanying the beginning of Gyanendra's reign -- the massacre of the late King and all other heirs to the throne -- he will have to continue to work hard to assert the legitimacy of his authority with the Nepali public. End Summary.

New King's First Trip Abroad

12. (C) Nepal's King Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah travels to New Delhi June 23 on his first trip abroad as monarch. Laden with bilateral symbolism, Gyanendra's week-long visit reportedly will also include stops at the Kamakhya temple near Guwahati in the northeastern state of Assam and in Calcutta, where he will worship at the Kali Temple and meet with West Bengal's Chief Minister. The head of Nepal's chambers of commerce federation will accompany the royals and hold separate meetings, including with the Commerce Minister. According to a leading businessmen with extremely close ties to the palace, India's PM Vajpayee hosts a private dinner for the King upon his arrival in India, the evening before the official program begins. Such hospitality is extraordinary, the businessman asserted, and signifies the importance the PM ascribed to the visit. (Note: The last visit of a Nepalese monarch to India was in January 1999, when King Birendra visited New Delhi and made a pilgrimage to see spiritual leader "Sai Baba" in South India. Birendra was a frequent visitor to India, and both he and Gyanendra attended school there as boys. End Note.)

Special Relationship and Common Heritage

13. (SBU) The businessman also portrayed the visit as a chance for the King to capitalize on his impressive speaking ability. During a recent interview with the editor of The Times of India -- his first to a foreign journalist since becoming King -- Gyanendra already employed his rhetorical skills to set the tone for the upcoming visit in remarks gauged to appeal to India's conservative government. For example, Gyanendra told The Times that "relations between Nepal and India are nurtured and enriched by noble ideals, values and principles inherent in a shared cultural heritage." The two countries enjoy "traditional bonds as good neighbors," and Indo-Nepalese ties "remain special because they are practical, pragmatic and beneficial."

India's Military on Assessment Tour

14. (C) These "pragmatic" relations will likely take the concrete form of additional Indian military assistance. Gyanendra's visit to India will come on the heels of an inspection by a four-officer Indian military assessment team now in Nepal. Led by a Major General, the team is visiting Royal Nepalese Army (RNA) facilities at Dharan, Nepalgunj and Gorkha. A military source confided to DATT that the team's visit is redundant, as India is well aware of Nepal's needs due to the well-developed and on-going relations between the two militaries. The speculation is that India launched the team to re-assert India's primary role in providing security assistance to Nepal after a U.S. PACOM team spent 22 days in

the Kingdom in April.

Pakistani Militants Reported in Nepal

15. (U) The King's visit also comes in the wake of headline-grabbing statements by Indian Home Minister Advani charging that bases have been established in Nepal by two Pakistan-based militant groups: Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed. Nepal's Foreign Ministry denied reports that New Delhi provided Kathmandu with information about such bases, but added that Nepal would take appropriate action if such evidence came to light.

All Uphill Year for the Monarchy

16. (C) Gyanendra was crowned King on June 4, 2001 in the midst of rioting that followed the shooting deaths of King Birendra and eight other family members on June 1. (Note: The King will come out of mourning for his late brother Birendra only on June 20, and for his late nephew and regicide Dipendra on June 22, auspicious dates marking the end of the lunar year of mourning. Observers expect him to become an even more visible presence after those dates. End Note.) Widely unpopular at the time of his enthronement -- many suspected him of having a hand in the June 1 massacre -- the new King has gained the reluctant acceptance of the Nepalese public over the past year. Carefully calculated appearances at religious ceremonies and measured public statements helped burnish his image. Some observers add that the King's status has appreciated in part because he compares favorably with Nepal's fractious and ineffectual elected leaders.

Playing the Religion Card

17. (SBU) According to Nepalese tradition, the King of Nepal is an incarnation of Vishnu, a major deity in the Hindu pantheon. Gyanendra has played up that role in a string of public appearances at religious sites and ceremonies. He has even appeared at religious occasions that his father, Mahendra, presided over, but that were neglected by his late brother Birendra over the past quarter century. Establishing his role as a religious figure has helped him gain acceptance among Nepal's mostly Hindu population -- less than one-third of whom are literate.

Voicing Support for Constitution

18. (SBU) In public statements and press interviews Gyanendra has tried to allay anxieties in some political circles that he nurtured aspirations of sweeping aside the democratic system, as his father did. The King has voiced strong support for Nepal's constitutional system and called for higher standards of governance and an end to violence (Reftel). An interview he gave to Nepal's official press service to mark the anniversary of his enthronement was "very well received," according to a local journalist. In it the King said that "public disenchantment and distrust grows if the basic needs of the people are not fulfilled and state leaders show indifference to the people's aspirations." Asked what role he would play if a failure to hold Parliamentary elections provoked a crisis, he declined to answer, labeling the question "hypothetical."

The Long, Prudent View

19. (C) Most observers agree that Nepal's royal palace may be the only political institution in Nepal focussed on the long view. To date, the King has gone by the book, supporting the constitutional limits on the monarchy in both word and practice. As a leading Nepali journalist put it, the King knows that if he is personally adventurous, it will be "doomsday" for his dynasty. At present, Nepal's political parties are weak and fractious, but eventually they will be strong again -- and will remember everything the King did, the journalist concluded.

Comment

110. (C) Gyanendra's early visit to New Delhi is clearly calculated to signify acknowledgement of the importance of India in shaping Nepal's future. Indian assistance will be key to defeating the Maoist insurgency and to stabilizing the democratic system in what will be a tenuous run-up to November elections. We assume the King will seek to solidify GOI support for the campaign against the Maoist insurgents and will want to request Vajpayee's assistance in supporting Nepal's democracy during the current constitutional crisis. One way would be for India to continue to reign in recently unseated Nepali Congress Party (NCP) President and former Prime Minister G.P. Koirala, who maintains close links with

Indian political leaders. In return, New Delhi will likely press for more proactive Nepali action against anti-Indian militants reportedly operating out of Nepal.

11. (C) Ironically, the King has been nurturing his image domestically at the same time that the public image of the NCP -- the party historically with the closest ties to India -- is at an all-time low. In his interview with The Times the King struck a fine balance between emphasizing equality and sovereignty for the benefit of his domestic audience and giving a nod to the "special relationship" with India. The emphasis on his religious role should also play well with India's Hindu nationalists. As Nepal's political leaders fight amongst themselves in the lead-up to the elections called for November, Gyanendra will likely continue to act with an eye to posterity, playing on his roles as both constitutional monarch and living deity in an attempt to establish the legitimacy of his authority. Given the unusual and distressing circumstances under which King Gyanendra acceded to the throne, the year-long mourning period may actually have worked in his favor as it gave the shocked and suspicious Nepali public time to accept the idea of him as monarch.

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